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ABSTRACT

This paper presents ideas concerning speech communication education for black students and discusses some of the difficulties that exist. Black Americans have not shared in the material wealth in America because blacks are systematically excluded as trespassers in the white world on the basis of race, not speech. The assumption that the first step to economic security is "good speech" is incongruous with the indisputable experience of blacks. Blacks, realizing this, are attempting to glorify the legitimacy and viability of their heritage and recognize it as one of many valid means of linguistic expression. The educational frames of reference should be changed and there should be means for developing new lines of orientation. The author presents a genuinely black frame of reference for ideological and theoretical consideration. Affect is postulated as the crucial component. The author suggests several thematic activities within the black frame of reference.
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# CHANGING FRAMES OF REFERENCE IN SPEECH COMMUNICATION EDUCATION FOR BLACK STUDENTS

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# CHANGING FRAMES OF REFERENCE IN SPEECH COMMUNICATION EDUCATION FOR BLACK STUDENTS

In the past few years, interest and research in many aspects of the communication of Blacks has been manifested by a variety of professionals as evidenced by publications in this area. Theoretical viewpoints of various disciplines are represented in the literature, but few reveal knowledge of or sensitivity to what may be the most crucial problem of linguistic diversity for pedagogical purposes.

As a Black pragmatist, my present concern is twofold: First, I am concerned with certain assumptions that underlie rapidly developing bodies of literature on Black communication. Secondly, I am concerned that the literature reveals a total ignorance of or disregard for the vital role affect plays in Black communication. I would like to set forth as directly as I can in the alloted time what I take to be the problem at issue and suggest and alternative course of action. I propose replacing the communication flow concept from cognition to affect with the concept from affect to cognition, the natural direction of flow in Black communication. Schools emphasize cognitive goals, often sacrificing affect in the process. Blacks emphasize affective goals which, when unmet, often sacrifices cognition in the process. The two currents are on a continuing collision course.

A general lack of knowledge about differences in communication flow patterns produces an educational situation where the patterns pass each other silently as ships in the night. It is fitting to approach this resultant educational problem by way of a reconstruction of some of its crucial elements which may be briefly stated. First, there is the conflict between the concept that Blacks must be given more and better education on the one hand and respected for what we are on the other. This paradoxical posture is meant to educate Blacks to a higher but unequal position on the status pole. The educational context for Blacks is designed to promote meaning, value, and pride in the communication of others, not their own, which effectively negates the "respect for Black culture" position. This concept reflects a general ignorance of, opposition to, and contempt for Black norms, sensibilities, values, capabilities and aspirations. The child is expected to adapt to a neutral culture, consisting of partial acceptance and partial rejection.

Secondly, there is the reality of mutual rejection in Black-white cultural and linguistic patterns which is inimical to real communication.

Thirdly, a crucial issue to be faced in the handling of differences is the lack of a variety of interpersonal situations that do not demand that the Black child become a linguistic "Oreo,"[1] a product called "show and tell without feeling" in the Black community. Communication is taught in relative situational poverty thereby losing the pragmatic value in performance communication. Taught as a dispassionate science, Black students as a collective are denied the opportunity to accept or reject, approve or dissapprove what they believe to be critical and important in communication behavior. They are only expected to approve and accept

[1]An "Oreo" or Oreo cookie" is a term created by Blacks to define and categorize a person perceived as Black on the outside and white on the inside.

curricula wherein individual and group goals and interests are defined with frames of reference of the superordinate group.

Finally, there is a failure to see the relationship between the learning situation and what is important to the Black child, e.g. the maintenance of group and self identity as a necessary goal of communication. "Speech" educators are generally insensitive to this survival factor in communication development programs for Black children. There is insensitivity to the fact that suppression and exploitation are "turn off" quotients in a discipline purporting to be "broad and humane." Speech education negates the focus of the discipline in the educatory process, a process defined by Cardinal John Newman as education which gives a man a clear conscious view of his <u>own</u> opinions and judgments, a truth in developing them, an eloquence in expressing them, and a force in urging them. It teaches him to see things as they are, to get right to the point....to detect what is sophisticate, and to discard what is irrelevant."[2]

The times now call for the "big solution," but the responses proposed impugn the intelligence of the group linguists and "speech people" purport to serve. The labels have been changed, but not the concepts. The first unpleasant fact which the profession must face is that Black Americans have not shared in the material wealth of America because Blacks are systematically excluded as trespassers in the white world on the basis of <u>race</u>, <u>not</u> <u>speech</u>. There can be no equivocation about de-mythologizing this assumption in the profession if more viable theories are to take root and grow. The assumption that the first step to economic security

[2]Quoted by Kenneth Hance, "Some Values of a Study of Rhetoric and Public Address in a Liberal or General Education." <u>Southern Speech Journal</u>, XXIII. (Summer, 1958), 181.

is "good speech" is incongruous with the indisputable experiences of Blacks. The disparity between the promise and fruits of education including the acquisition of "good speech," is attested by the numerous mail sorters and carriers who hold advanced degrees in Chicago and elsewhere. Ask Blacks about the speech of white workers in the construction trades which Blacks have been unable to crack to any appreciable degree in this country. The inability of Blacks to crack the trade unions and the bitterness the question engenders speaks to the lack of unity and identity of views between Blacks and educators on the speech-economic mobility assumption.

Now an entire generation of Blacks has come of age; a generation which does not deny, but attempts to glorify, the legitimacy and viability of its heritage and which recognizes it as one of many valid means of linguistic expression. It is an influence young Blacks must cope with to find their own visions of communication functionality; their own sanctions for acculturative behavior in the larger world; their own version of economic mobility without loss of group identity. L. C. Hurd commenting on the fact that Black students do not want to commit themselves to "others" frames of reference puts the problem more tersely: "We all got to be prepared to get back into the system with the <u>right</u> equipment. To change the system, you gotta get in first. Too many Black Cats can't fight whitey on his own terms. We gotta prepare men to be Senators, Congressmen, and lawyers, and to talk back, and to

speak up. Like that Julian Bond is a groovey kind of guy cause he can talk whitey's language. Yet he ain't forgot the Brothers."[3]

The school may be described as an institution which practices a refugee-generating process but in which there is no refuge for Blacks except by mutation. What is important to consider is the change in the Black man's conception of himself and his community which has programmatic implications. This new perception dictates a change from the juxtaposition of the completely invisible and the partially invisible Black child to the totality of the current Black-Consciousness Renaissance which rejects the same old devices which speak to powerlessness; the same old context within which Black aspirations will be interpreted and considered.[4] The only realistic thing to do is to come to practical terms with the Black movement by having something significant to say about the Black experience in communication education. Satisfying this requirement provides an outlet for and promotes self confidence, self/group identity, racial pride, and power. Black communication is, above all esle, a presentation of self. The student can no longer be regarded as the passive element, the receptacle, but never the fountain.

Education for Black children represents a disruption of the warm world of Black culture, their "being" world, their frame of reference their nurture of life. This frame of reference demands allegiance and gives much in return in face to face relationships. This sanguine relationship of blood and territorality forms protective groups for the child.

[3]Hurd, L. C. "Black and Proud Behind Bars." Ebony, August, 1969, p. 72.

[4]Bennett, Jr. Lerone. The Challenge of Blackness. An Institute of the Black World Paper, Institute of the Black World. Atlanta, Georgia, 1971.

The school is abstract, a place demanding that the child defend himself against cultural erosion in a hostile environment. For many children it is a lonely and terrifying journey.

To the extent that affect is recognized as co-variant with cognition, it represents an alternative role for communication education. It is the component at issue in changing frames of reference in stating and achieving objectives for Black children.

Affect is defined here as a sense of truth conveyed through feeling tones and harmonious emotions, a control mechanism determining degrees of acceptance or rejection, a way of organizing the world. Affect, therefore, is the most influential, motivational, controlling force of behavior in Black culture whose meaning and significance is shared by members of the group.

Black modes of affect are defined by culturally specific cues determined and shared by members of the group. The defining process permits varying degrees of reactions acceptable to its members but within an acceptable frame of reference. Affect is thus defined differently in different situations. Black students are in effect demanding the right to define affect for themselves and retain it according to their frame of reference in a given situation.

Affect is a construct dynamically relating to norms and expectations, significant problems and concerns, aspirations and specific connotations in the collective life of Blacks. Individual interests are defined and members categorized according to its impact. Affect is king. It indicates directions of change which cross class boundaries serving as a catalyst,

a cohesive element in a collective reference of relationships.

A communication program must provide learning experiences in a new learning environment which allows the student to examine the feelings and attitudes of Blacks. It must not be a place where "the king must die" if students needs are to be satisfied.

Operationally, the affective perspective of the Black experience as a frame of reference represents an alternative to our present destructive approach. Each child is viewed as a capsule of the collective life of the group utilizing activities which deal with its crucial issues and interests. Some means for developing new lines of orientation in changing frames of reference are suggested in the following activities. The list is meant to be suggestive not exhaustive.

## THEMATIC ACTIVITIES

I. Discussion

Students discuss examples of racism toward Emmett Ashford, the Black umpire, in Jim Bouton's book Ball Four.

Students discuss the communication styles and messages of The Last Poets.

Students discuss the language of Verta Grosvenor's book Vibration Cooking. The teacher might pose the question, "Why is Verta called the Moms Mabley of the typewriter?" as the discussion starter.

Students discuss the semantic difference between the terms ghetto and colony, disadvantaged and colonized.

The language innovation of Flip Wilson and Redd Fox.

Welfare liberation and "Mother Power."

Leo McCann's notions of "Tryin to Make It Real" in the album Swiss Movement.

II. Reports

Compare Normal Mailers "The White Negro" with the current concept of an "Oreo."

Compare the "White Mystique" with the "Black Mystique."

Develop criteria for evaluation of a Soul Music Station, e.g. ownership, issues presented, types of programming, advertising, etc. Who reaps the financial profit from such stations? Initiate reports on Black art forms, slum landlords, goods and services in the Black community.

Compile a list of English terms which originated in Black culture, were "borrowed" by whites and ultimately diffused throughout the

the dominant culture.

III. Decision Making

Decide whether imitation dilutes. Use white imitators of Black music such as the Beatles, Janis Joplin, etc. Decide why such imitators have been able to reap financial benefits and many Blacks have not.

What is the significance of Lorraine Ellison's "Stay With Me?"

Why did Harry Edwards call Jessie Owens an "Uncle Tom" in his book Blackthink?

Why does the statement "If he going down, you don't put no hurt on him" represent a Black cultural norm?

Is using drugs to control unruly Black children an acceptable practice to you or not?

In classroom application, examples of the kind given illustrate that Black students studying speech communication events without a frame of reference is like studying events in banking without reference to money.

In conclusion, this paper has presented a genuine Black frame of reference for ideological and theoretical consideration. Affect is postulated as the crucial component in the frame of reference. I have suggested that planning and practical efforts in speech communication education derive from the Black students point of view. The goals of acculturation without assimilation can best be achieved by harmonizing them with the goals of Blacks. Harmony can best be achieved by providing a Black frame of reference, an alternate mode of access in communication

education. The alternative choice is further investment in the wrong kind of education for Black students.